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# The Muslim Veil in America: A Symbol of Oppression or Empowerment?

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THE MUSLIM VEIL IN AMERICA: A SYMBOL OF OPPRESSION OR  
EMPOWERMENT?

by

Hannah R. Blakeman

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Anthropology)

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University of Maine

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to look at Muslim women in America who veil and how Americans perceive them. The U.S. media has presented a common theme of negative stereotypes about women who veil, including the idea that they are oppressed or associated with terrorist groups. Here, I examine how Americans perceive beauty and how those perceptions may be associated with the negative images of Muslim women who veil. This thesis takes a look at the background of veiling within Islam, how Islam and veiling have been portrayed in the media, and how perceptions of beauty shape what Americans believe about veiling. To examine these issues, I utilized secondary research and two supplemental personal interviews, one with a non-Muslim American woman and the other with a Muslim woman who used to—but not longer does—veil. The results I found were that, in America, a Muslim woman wears the veil as a form of empowerment. However, there are many different factors that lead non-Muslim Americans to believe that they are oppressed.

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## Introduction

Since the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks, there has been an incredible amount of publicity in the United States over the use of the Muslim veil. The veil is a gendered way of dressing in Islam and includes the *hijab*, the *niqab*, and the *burqa*. So why is there a fixation on the veil? There is this prevalent notion in America that Muslim women are controlled by their male superiors and the veil these women wear is perceived as a symbol of that oppression. Moreover, since 9/11, veiling, which can serve as an outward sign of a Muslim identity, has often been associated with terrorism. In addition, gendered notions of beauty in America often shape how women who wear the Muslim veil are viewed. One of the major differences between American culture and Muslim cultures is the general perception of beauty and how sexuality should or should not be portrayed in public. This brings me to my thesis statement: America's negative attitude toward the Muslim veil may stem from people's differing perceptions of beauty and sexuality while also being a result of the post-9/11 idea that Muslim women are associated with terrorism and "oppressed" by their male superiors.

I will start by giving some background and define what I mean by the "Muslim veil" and a brief background of where it came from as well as the influence of 9/11 on discrimination against Muslim women in the United States. I will then go into how the media has influenced Americans in their perceptions of Islam as a religion and the use of the Muslim veil. There are various meanings given to the veil and I will explore how beauty is perceived in both America and Islam and how that may influence how these women are viewed. Throughout these sections I have included some supplemental

information that I retrieved from doing two interviews of women located in Maine (See Appendix A).

*What is the hijab?*

The word “hijab” varies from culture to culture. In the Christian West, the term “veil” is used to mean a covering of the face, but in Arabic the term “hijab” refers to a barrier or curtain (Shaheed 2008:295). This can be seen in the translation and English definition of the word “hijab.” According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the hijab is “the traditional covering for the hair and neck that is worn by Muslim women” (See Figure 1, Appendix C). The Qur’an gives various meanings to the term “hijab,” including “a thing that prevents, hinders, debars, or precludes; a thing that veils, conceals, hides, covers, or protects, because it prevents seeing, or beholding...a partition, a bar, a barrier, or an obstacle” (Ruby 2006:55). According to the Islamic faith, the hijab signifies things other than a headscarf; it also represents modest clothing and modest behavior (Ruby 2006:57). In this research, I will be using the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition when I use the word hijab.

There are other forms of veiling as well that cover the body more than the hijab. Most prominent of those is the burqa and the niqab. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the burqa is “a long piece of clothing that covers the face and body and that is worn by some Muslim women in public places” (See Figure 2, Appendix C) and the niqab is “a veil for covering the hair and face except for the eyes that is worn by some Muslim women” (See Figure 3, Appendix C). While the burqa or niqab are more synonymous with the oppressive stereotype of the Muslim faith, the hijab is more prevalent in America. Therefore, many people impose negative stereotypes on the

women who wear that visible marker of faith. While veiling is rooted in national heritage and place of residence (Cole and Ahmadi 2003:56), people embrace the hijab more readily in non-Muslim countries than their home country (Ruby 2006:61). Some women have a “static” view of their country of origin and are surprised to find that the women there are relaxing their dress code in a way that is improper (Ruby 2006:61). Because of this, these women find it is important to act as “guardian of Muslim standards” in the country they are living because people “back home” are careless in maintaining this image (Ruby 2006:61).

#### *Brief History of Veiling in the Middle East*

The history of veiling is large and complex, as there are many different cultures that practice Islam and have different requirements for veiling. Ali-Karamali states that about the time when the Qur’an was made (seventh century), women were considered beneath men in the Arabian countries (Ali-Karamali 2008:122). This was a time when domestic violence was assumed, men treated and controlled women as part of their property, and there was the practice of burying female infants alive within these pre-Islamic cultures (Ali-Karamali 2008:121). The Qur’an acts within the historical context of the seventh century with the aim of eliminating many heinous practices, like female infanticide (Ali-Karamali 2008:121). Ali-Karamali believes that it actually raised the status of women as it protected them from the men and allowed them to enter the public space and still maintain modesty (Ali-Karamali 2008:123). Women were suddenly allowed to testify in court, to inherit property and keep their property upon marriage. Moreover, women would no longer be objects of sale or owned by their husbands, and their husbands were no longer allowed to abuse them (Ali-Karamali 2008:122).

Islam actually rejects the story that Eve seduced Adam (Bunting 2001). This story, as told in Christianity, eventually led to the downfall of Adam and Eve, thus leading Christians to promote celibacy and a general distaste for sex (Bunting 2001). With Islam, a man must sexually satisfy his wife, and it is understood that a woman's sexuality is active, whereas in Christianity it is supposed to be passive (Bunting 2001). Thus, Islam gives women a higher status traditionally than Christianity did.

Historically, the veil has not been entirely controlled by religion, but by the State (Shaheed 2008:301). For example, different Islamic countries in the Middle East had and still have different commandments on how women should wear the veil. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan does not require wearing the veil, but in the Islamic Republic of Iran, even tourists are required to cover (Shaheed 2008:301). Both of these countries are considered Islamic; however, their governments determine the restrictions on women's clothing.

In the Victorian Era, European men reflected the view of female inferiority and projected it on Muslim women. This era imposed modesty and standards of appropriate behavior on the women in Europe. What the men could not say about European women could be said about Eastern women as they were considered counter to the "ideal Western female" and were thus depicted as such (Haddad 2007:258). This is seen through the literature of the time where Muslims (or Eastern characters) were seen as "bizarre and sexually perverse. Descriptions of women focus on their promiscuity, devilishness, and huge sexual appetites" (Haddad 2007:258).

To justify their occupation of Muslim lands, the British and French colonists set out to unveil the women who practiced Islam (Haddad 2007:257). This was further



justified by the Western paradigm of Islamic inferiority (Haddad 2007:257). This paradigm was based on the fact that the European colonists' mission to remove the veil from the women "was a way to demean conquered subjects, justifying the occupation of their lands and the usurpation of their resources" (Haddad 2007:257). Missionaries at this time as well were concerned with liberating these "victimized" women. Because converting them to Christianity was not feasible, they instead aimed at penetrating Islamic societies and altering their values through women (Haddad 2007:261). The Muslim brotherhood (from the Oxford Dictionaries, "An Islamic religious and political organization dedicated to the establishment of a nation based on Islamic principles... founded in Egypt in 1928, it has become a radical underground force in Egypt and other Sunni countries, promoting strict moral discipline and opposing Western influence, often by violence") defended the veil in response to the British takeover and the veil became a symbol of resistance and the rejection of alien values (Haddad 2007:257-8). They believed that the veil was a commandment from God and it was part of the Islamic tradition (Haddad 2007:257).

*What does the Qur'an say about veiling?*

These are the two verses typically cited about a woman's dress code by the Qur'an:

*1) And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty...And that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments (24:31)*

*2) O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): this is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And God is oft forgiving, most merciful. (33:59) (Ruby 2006:56)*

The Qur'an is very vague about what the clothing "requirements" are for women. Each woman interprets the Qur'an in her own way and bases her attitude toward veiling on that interpretation. After doing their own independent studies of the Qur'an, some women believe the hijab to be mandatory and that it fulfills a religious requirement (Ali 2005:517). However, the Qur'an never references the hijab as a part of a woman's dress code (Ruby 2006:55), and nowhere does it state how much of a woman needs to be covered (Ali 2005:517). All this is based on how someone interprets the verses. The original words used in the Qur'an have many different meanings and have been translated many different ways. In the Qur'an the word "hijab" has many different meanings associated with it. In most parts of the Qur'an, the word "hijab" is used in a metaphysical sense, "meaning illusion or referring to the illusory aspect of creation" (Ruby 2006:55). This has both positive and negative connotations, depending on the situation in which the word is used as we can see in the next two examples. (Ruby 2006:56). The hijab is used in the context meaning "an obstacle, or a hindrance, keeping non-believers from understanding the message of God" (Ruby 2006:56). It can also indicate a "separation between different groups of people who would be waiting to enter heaven" (Ruby 2006:56). These two examples are of the connotations that the *word* hijab has in the Qur'an. In each example, it does not refer to clothing.

The Qur'an asks for modesty by both males and females. The men are required to divert their eyes from women entirely, and women need to wear modest dress (Droogsma 2007:306). However, if men are not supposed to look at women, then why do the women need to worry about covering themselves to avoid the sexual gaze of these men? Well,

not all men comply with this, and, in America, women have interactions with men who are not Muslim as well (Droogsma 2007:306).

### *Islam in America*

Young, second generation women in America are deciding to wear the veil even though some of their older relatives do not (Ali 2005:515). This may be due to shifts in the “American social landscape” that started in the late 1980s that strive toward showing Muslim identity (Ali 2005:515-16). These young women are in high school or college, which happens to be a pivotal moment in their creation of their selves. There are a lot of second-generation Muslim children whose parents immigrated to the United States; as they got older it became more important to develop their religious identity as an aspect of themselves (Peek 2005:229). They set out to define Islam and research it in their own way (Ali 2005:525). The young women who wear the hijab are the daughters of immigrants and practice a minority religion in a country that does not understand it (Williams and Vashi 2007:272). Thus, they move to a college in a city where social, religious, and ethnic diversity is widespread (Williams and Vashi 2007:272). College allows for more freedom, and the women find that they are able to research their religion without the ever-present influence of their relatives. In the U.S., some women grew up in communities where there were not many Muslim people; however, when they went to college, they were able to find all-Muslim friends, do more research, and make the personal decision to wear the veil (Williams and Vashi 2007:283). According to one author, “the Muslim youth in America are becoming rigidly conservative and condemnatory” because they hold their religion with more esteem than their national heritage (Peek 2005:220). In resistance to the perceived effort to eradicate the religion of

Islam in America post-9/11, young American-born Muslim women have taken on a “century old view of the hijab as a symbol of solidarity and resistance” (Haddad 2007:254).

In America, upper-class white men have traditionally held power using “powerful patriarchal discourses that attempt to prescribe women’s experiences and to restrict their choice” (Droogsma 2007:297). The Women’s Rights movement in America led to women becoming vocal about their place in society and becoming empowered to change the world. Part of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s was the emergence of the critique of religious patriarchy, which had become part of the American culture (Williams and Vashi 2007:272). Women became empowered to rise above men and be considered equal to men in every aspect of the world (economic, social, etc.). Middle class American women insisted on moving out of the domestic or private sphere and into the workforce. However, in Islamic society, women being “equal” to men, means something different. Muslims believe that having equal worth in the purpose of every human life (to know God) is what equality is all about and that can happen in the domestic life or in the public sphere (Bunting 2001). This distinction between “public” and “private” spheres in Islam becomes a complication when women come out into the workforce (Bunting 2001). By wearing the veil, they are able to be out in the public while maintaining their traditional modesty.

### *Impact of 9/11*

The terrorist attacks and destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 had a tremendous negative impact on views toward Islam by the American people. Because the hijab is a prominent indicator of the Islamic faith, it is a visible

indicator of being Muslim, and women who wore the veil post 9/11 were treated with less respect (Droogsmas 2007:312). It became a symbol of oppression and violence of Islamic beliefs (Zeiger 2008:278). The Bush administration launched a campaign that stressed the need to mobilize armed forces to liberate the Muslim women in Afghanistan from their degrading conditions (Haddad 2007:255). The Americans did this by “liberating” the Muslim women in Afghanistan from wearing the burqa. While the Taliban enforced the rule requiring women to wear the burqa, it is actually a centuries-old tradition that had been around long before the Taliban came along (Ruby 2006:63). The images of the women wearing the burqa left a negative impact on the American people and the perception of Islam as an oppressive faith.

It is important to note that there tends to be confusion between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The media can often times confuse the distinction between the two. It was Al-Qaeda that formulated and followed through with the terrorist attacks on 9/11. The Taliban is a group in the Middle East that translates the Qur’an in a direct and extreme way. The Taliban is not the same group as Al-Qaeda. After the terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush sent troops to Afghanistan (which was controlled by the Taliban) because he believed that they were harboring members of Al-Qaeda. While there, the United States set out to liberate the women from under the rule of the Taliban. This can lead to some confusion over which group is responsible for what because they were targeted at the same time by the United States for different reasons.

The veil became a symbol of a great evil against the very essence of America. It was associated with those who had declared war on the United States (Haddad 2007:263). Not only did it stand for the enemy but also all that is against America—the freedoms

associated with democracy (Moore 2007:239). With the hijab representing a negative symbol to the American people, women who wore the veil were treated differently. They faced greater scrutiny and suspicion as there was a general fear of Muslims (Droogsma 2007:294). There became no respect for the scarf (Droogsma 2007:308). Not only were women who veiled treated with less respect, but they were treated with anger as well (Droogsma 2007:312). The workplace was affected, too, as in the nine months following the terrorist attacks, there were nearly five hundred charges of discrimination in the workplace, as women who wore the hijab or were associated with Islam were fired (Moore 2007:245).

Not only were the women who wore the hijab treated differently, they were also targets of abuse. The media has associated the veil with the “enemy” (Droogsma 2007:308) and it became increasingly associated with violence and intolerance. The hijab was even used as a sign meaning “terrorist woman” (Ruby 2006:63). Even in Canada following the attacks women who wore the Muslim veil were treated as such. They were targets of verbal assaults against their ethnicity and race, all for wearing the hijab (Ruby 2006:63).

Religion became more important for Americans in general, as it became a necessary part of assertions of identity (Moore 2007:239). People sought spiritual anchors in various faiths (Peek 2005:231). By identifying closer with their religion, Muslim women felt they needed to modify and increase the visible aspects of their religious identity (Peek 2005:234). The increasing desire for Islamic identity coupled with the negative American stereotypes associated with Islam made discrimination more common toward Muslim women post 9/11. Because they were often targets of

discrimination, these women often felt they had to prove their faith to the American public. As targets of abuse, they did a self-evaluation and they asked themselves if they were Muslims in a meaningful way (Ali 2005:524). By re-evaluating their lifestyles, they reverted more to their religion to help them in this time of need.

There seems to be an ever-present negative attitude toward Islam since the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Visibly wearing Islamic symbols hints at inner Islamic beliefs and these inner beliefs are thought to be jihad (which defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “a holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious duty”) (Ibrahim 2014). According to some scholars, there is a correlation between the hijab and increased terrorism in the Western countries that allow it (Ibrahim 2014). One reporter stated in an article that wearing the Islamic traditional dress (beard for men, hijab for women) means that you adhere to all the “problematic” parts of Islam (Ibrahim 2014). He stated this as fact, but it was really just his opinion. To the media, Islam is a rigid state of mind that has no variation, and this is how the people who read the articles come to think.

#### *Discrimination and veiling in the United States*

The hijab has become a symbol of the Islamic faith and does not always have a positive connotation: “it has become the most visible symbol of Muslim identity and issues in America” (Williams and Vashi 2007:271). The symbol of a woman wearing the hijab went through a transformation in Western culture from a symbol of reverence or mystery to a symbol of tyranny (Zeiger 2008:266). The veil is associated with everything that is not part of Western society and “lifting the veil has become a metaphor for freedom and democracy” (Zeiger 2008:266). People in the United States tend to look at

the hijab through the lens of Western society, which can cause discrimination against women who veil.

Since the veil is considered a symbol of oppression and limits an individual's freedom, the American lifestyle opposes the veil. The Islamic civilization has been defined as this "degenerate" culture by some feminists in America (Haddad 2007:261). According to Haddad, these feminists believe that American culture and values should be universal and imposed on all other people (Haddad 2007:262). As a general rule, Americans prize individuality and release from external obligations or coercion (Williams and Vashi 2007:272). The misconceptions generated from the American public may come from a lack of cultural and religious exposure; therefore, they have a lack of information (Cole and Ahmadi 2003:58). Out in public, religious symbols are not tolerated very well. For example, until recently, the pentagon had a strict dress code banning Islamic beards, turbans (mainly worn by Sikhs but also by some Muslims) and hijabs (Ibrahim 2014). There are also school dress codes that prohibit wearing the veil to make sure the "secularized public sphere" does not have any religious interference while also maintaining the separation of church and state (Moore 2007:243). If schools were to allow particular religious attire at school, then they run the risk of appearing to favor a particular religion (Moore 2007:244). This has led to the girls who do wear the hijab to be mocked at school on the basis of being different, and it becomes a fear for them (Peek 2005:226).

Equality is a core American value. There is this overarching notion that everyone needs to be treated the same and be liberated from external authorities (Williams and Vashi 2007:275). This has led to cultural changes in American society such as women



wearing pants, playing sports, and the general relaxation of sexual double standards; anything different from this is considered inequality (Williams and Vashi 2007:275). The push towards equal rights enforces gender neutrality, and, as a result of that, any behavior that results in the separation of sexes is rejected (Williams and Vashi 2007:275). Because of this, the hijab is considered a manifestation of gender inequality because women wear it and men do not (Williams and Vashi 2007:275). Some American feminists in particular are generally outspoken about the use of the hijab by Muslim women; “women who aren’t bothered by veiling just don’t know any better, and one day, with guidance and continued freedom, they will be enlightened and stop veiling” (Kahf 2008:38).

Since Americans consider themselves liberated women, they identify the covered faces and bodies of veiled women as constrained (Zeiger 2008:266). Part of this perception comes from Afghanistan, where there were other factors, not veiling, that led to the oppression of women (Zeiger 2008:272). These include the way that the geographic, economic, and social relationships intertwine to oppress the women (Zeiger 2008:272). People view these women as under the control of the men and that is against what “American freedom” stands for. As an example, the wife of the Saudi ambassador during the early 1980s, Nuha al-Hegelan, talked to high school teachers about the veil and how when she wears a designer scarf around her shoulders it is seen as fashionable, but when it is covering her hair it is seen as oppressive (Haddad 2007:262). Seeing the veil as a symbol of oppression, many Americans believe that as proof that the women who wear the hijab need to be “saved” (Droogsma 2007:294). The veil is used to justify the inferiority and the “barbarism” of the Arabs in Muslim societies (Droogsma

2007:296). Going along with American morals, requiring the use of the veil has been argued to be a “manifestation of, and mechanism for, the suppression of women’s freedom and identity” (Mussap 2009:122).

While America is valued for the rich diversity and ethnicity of its immigrant populations, this value extends to cultural diversity more than religious diversity. Cultural identity is admired, as we see with celebrating benign events like “St. Patrick’s Day,” which is an Irish holiday and celebrated by anyone who can identify with the Irish in America. However, religious identity is meant to be kept at home and not brought to public attention. That is why veiling for religious— not cultural— reasons can lead to fear and suspicion as opposed to intrigue (Cole and Ahmadi 2003:57).

American power is seen as “clean, rational, and constructive” whereas Muslim society is viewed as irrational, with random violence including assault and hatred (Zeiger 2008:276). What is not realized by the American public is that some Muslim women have had power in their traditional countries long before the feminist movement in America. They have been queens, heads of state, and rulers for centuries (Ali-Karamali 2008:118). When a woman wears the hijab, some Americans only see the veil that she wears. They do not pay attention to the women doctors, lawyers, prime ministers, presidents, professors, and judges (Ali-Karamali 2008:120). So why is it when Muslim women have had highly educated, prestigious positions in public that they are still viewed as oppressed? There are many factors that lead to this. Most notable is the portrayal of veiled women by the media.

### **Islam in the Media**

The influence of media images on the American people stems from more than just the American media itself. With the internet, people have access to news from around the world. They are aware of the issues going on in Muslim countries, but they refer to Western media outlets in order to gain the “truth”. A major theme brought on by the media is that Muslim women are oppressed.

The media has become a major influence in America. Generally, what the media has to say about something reflects or influences what the general public thinks. They have identified the veil with “Islamic militancy, extremism, jihadism, and oppression of women” (Haddad 2007:255). For most Americans, their only knowledge of Muslim women comes from the presentation of them in the media. The press has consistently treated Muslim women or Muslims in general in derogatory terms (Haddad 2007:259). This, in turn, influences the public’s perceptions of Muslim people.

A highly publicized topic in the media is about the banning of religious symbols in public. France, keeping with its secular tradition, banned religious symbols completely from public places on February 10, 2004 (Droogsma 2007:314). This included all types of the Muslim veil, including the hijab. The government there relied on dominant conceptions rather than actual knowledge from the women who wore the veil; the result was that the ban took away women’s agency (Droogsma 2007:314). Women were not free to wear what they wanted in public. This has started debate among other countries about the use of veiling in public.

In the Canadian province of Quebec, there is an ongoing debate about wearing religious symbols and, most notably, whether the veil should be banned in public. This is

because a lot of the time, women would start wearing the veil (in this case the niqab) upon first arriving in Canada (Mercury 2014). One reporter mentioned that there is an increasing amount of “hijabaphobia” in Quebec because of this debate (Adam 2014). Women who wear the veil are being harassed, and there are even instances where people are going up to the women and trying to remove the head scarf forcefully (Adam 2014). A Canadian couple spoke out during one of the hearings on this debate. They mentioned going to Morocco and being pickpocketed by people wearing the veil (Canadian Post 2014). They used prejudiced thoughts to infer that the same thing could happen again in Quebec.

People perceive the hijab as holding women back from doing things outside the home and interfering with their activities. Recently FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) allowed veiling when playing soccer (Shingler 2014). This is a major step in getting rid of the stereotype against active women wearing the hijab. However, there was an incident on a Canadian subway where a woman’s head scarf got caught in an elevator and she was strangled to death. This is an example of what people call “death by hijab” (Kanji 2014). This was publicized by the media to support the idea that the hijab should not be worn out in public. That people immediately thought of this death as an honor killing (defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as, “the traditional practice in some countries of killing a family member who is believed to have brought shame on the family”), which has an extremely negative connotation in Western media (Kanji 2014), shows the degree to which veiling is feared. As the reporter put it, the women are seen as “strangled by their religion, both figuratively and literally” (Kanji 2014).

A debate in American culture is whether or not women are allowed to wear the veil while testifying in court. This is brought on by the media portrayal of isolated incidents from around the world about women in court cases. In September of 2013, a 22 year-old woman in Great Britain who was told she could not testify in court if she wore the niqab because it covers her face (Murray 2014). In this case, people were in an uproar over the fact that a woman was allowed to cover her face during the testimony (Murray 2014). Eventually the court compromised with her so that while she was testifying, she was allowed to remove the veil behind a partition so that only the judge, jurors, and attorneys could see her, not the general public (Abelkader 2014). However, this caused some negative images of Islam to be portrayed by the media. This seemingly triumphant moment for religious freedom was seen as oppressive to the general population of England, as they only saw it as a way for the Muslims to impose their faith on the legal system (Murphy 2014). In the English system there is the belief that “open justice overrides religious beliefs” (Camber 2014). The reason why removing the veil is seen as so important during a court case is that the judge and jurors need a way to assess the credibility of the testimony given by the women (Abelkader 2014). In this case, the English government compromised with the woman so that each party’s interests were met. However, while a compromise seemed like the best solution, people were viewing this as a win for Islam, and there was the general feeling that the Muslims were taking over the political system (Murray 2014).

One of the most influential sources of print media is the magazine *National Geographic*. This is used as a trusted source for displaying “genuine” science and culture. In 1985, a story was run about the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. A

photographer saw a woman from Afghanistan at a refugee camp in Pakistan and snapped her photo (See Figure 4, Appendix C). Here, she was depicted as an innocent victim of war and this image became very famous (Zeiger 2008:271). In fact, this woman's picture became so famous that the same photographer returned in 2002 to find her and take her picture again (See Figures 5 and 6, Appendix C). Here, he found that she now covered herself completely in the burqa, as was required in Afghanistan at the time. He took her picture again, and this time she was depicted as a victim of the aftermath of the war, "a woman made inaccessible by the outcome of the [Soviet] invasion" (Zeiger 2008:271). The images in 2002 displayed her as an oppressed woman who needed to have her husband present when she was being identified because it required the removal of her veil. She was photographed with the veil on as well as with it off (as you can see in Figures 5 and 6, Appendix C). Both sets of pictures (1985 and 2002) display negative views of the oppression of Afghan women (Zeiger 2008:276). What people may not realize is that the stories run by *National Geographic* were highly politically motivated as propaganda against the brutality of Islamic rule (Zeiger 2008:271). They linked Islamic fundamentalism with terrorism; however, in the 1985 story, the U.S. was using this as a way to promote the Soviet-Afghan conflict (Zeiger 2008:271). Women who hide their faces will not communicate, yet "we claim [these pictures alone] convey volumes about the condition of women, the repressive nature of traditional religious practices and the backward ... nations in which they live" (Zeiger 2008:267). While *National Geographic* is a trusted source by the American people as a way of telling the complete truth, the images that it portrays are used in a political nature that caters to the ideals of the American government.

Some American women have a strong negative feeling about the hijab due to media coverage of veiled women being oppressed as well as the voices of some feminists, who are the most outspoken critics of veiling (Droogsma 2007:308). Unfortunately, the media in the U.S. only reports the negative images of women who wear hijab (Ruby 2006:63). This negative portrayal acts as sort of a political act for the U.S. government. As with colonialism, people need a justified reason for occupying a land, or in the case today, sending troops and spending money. Veiling is seen as one of the most visible differences between American and Middle Eastern culture and the negative propaganda is used to justify political actions.

### **The Meanings of the Veil**

Clothing represents a type of person and acts as a “kind of visual metaphor for identity” (Droogsma 2007:296). It is also a visual means of identifying the community a person belongs to: “clothes can create boundaries between people and shape collective identities....they are a visual means of creating community” (Shaheed 2008:294). Identity construction is centered around the meaning one gives to the clothes he or she wears (Moore 2007:239). Although communities dress alike and seem to have certain “dress codes,” even within these groups dress codes often differ for men and women (Ruby 2006:58). The media also plays a big role in determining how women should look in order to achieve the independence that the culture values (Hesse-Biber et al 2006:212).

In America and the rest of Western society, there is a need to define oneself in terms of culture, ethnicity, religion, and nationality (Shaheed 2008:297). There are rising numbers of immigrants in America and displaying ethnic identity has become even more

important (Ali 2005:521). Identifying with similar groups of immigrants is important in defining one's self, group affiliations, structural positions, and ascribed and achieved statuses (Peek 2005:216-7). For many immigrants, religion is emphasized more than ethnicity (Peek 2005:218). This is prevalent in immigrants from Islamic countries. People from diverse ethnic backgrounds join together by their religion and create diverse communities (Peek 2005:219). To affiliate with these groups, religious dress and practices are used as an important identity marker (Peek 2005:219). When a woman wears the veil in public, she may be asked "Where are you from?" hinting at the fact that a Muslim woman cannot ethnically be American (Peek 2005:225). In America we tend to define people more by their ethnic or national background and not by their religion, as it is not deemed as important (Peek 2005:225).

Women's clothing is used to conceal and attract attention depending on the local standards of beauty, modesty, and gender because female sexuality is often harnessed for the integrity of the community (Shaheed 2008:298). Yet, sexual control of women is prevalent in patriarchal societies and they use dress codes to enforce that control; this refers to both Muslim and non-Muslim countries (Shaheed 2008:299). There is this basic human thought that "clothing is about the beautification of the body and is designed to attract the opposite sex for the purpose of procreation" (Shaheed 2008:298). American society has its own ideas about how women should dress and behave. Masculine clothing norms dictate what acceptable fashion is for women, for example tight clothes and high heels (Droogsma 2007:296). American cultural norms greatly influence how women feel in regards to being attractive. There is pressure from capitalist interests and patriarchal perspectives for women to be thin (Hesse-Biber et al, 2006:212). Self-esteem for an



American woman is often dependent on her perceived attractiveness to the opposite sex (Hesse-Biber et al, 2006:210). It can be argued that American culture oppresses women through promoting unattainable ideals of beauty and thinness (Mussap 2006:122).

Adding to the many metaphors that clothing represents, it is also a visual representation of social, political, and historical context of people (Shaheed 2008:294). Moreover, wearing certain clothing can be used as political acts as well as acts of resistance against structural constraints (Droogsma 2007:312).

A curious example is the comparison between Muslims and Americans in how they perceive a diamond. When presented with a diamond, a Muslim woman wants to keep it in a safe place where only special people can see it, whereas an American woman wants to flaunt it so that everyone can see it (Droogsma 2007:309). This diamond is a reflection of their bodies; with the hijab, a Muslim woman has control over who has entry because she believes her beauty is a precious thing that not everyone should see (Droogsma 2007:309). This highlights the difference of perceptions of beauty by these women.

It is important at this point to reflect on my interviews with two women (See Appendix A). One was a non-Muslim American woman whom I will call Jane, and the other was a Muslim woman who used to wear the veil, who I will call Laiba. In my interview with Jane I asked her about her feelings in regards to the Muslim veil. She told me that she does not think of those women as different and that she certainly does not think that they are oppressed. She claimed that since veiling is not part of American culture it will probably never really be accepted.

I asked Jane and Laiba what veiling meant to their peers on campus and in their communities. Jane simply responded that if she saw a woman wearing the hijab or another form of veiling that she may stop a second, but her only response would be to mentally factor that the woman is Muslim. She admitted that a Muslim woman wearing the veil would be a little out of the ordinary, but nothing more. Laiba also had a positive view of how women are perceived wearing the veil. Coming from another country where veiling is mandatory, Laiba decided to throw off the veil when she arrived in America. However, she has friends who veil and she said they are regarded “very well” in American society. These interviews show another side of the argument of discrimination in America of Muslim women. It could be that lack of discrimination is a geographic thing, as both of these women were situated in Maine. It could also mean that discrimination against women who wear the veil is becoming less in this ethnically diverse country. This raises questions that would require further research to explain.

In my interview with Jane, we talked about the Muslim veil as a requirement for religion. She did not like the idea of that as she believed that if a person was only wearing it as a requirement then it is not the right religion for her. It made wearing the veil seem like a job. Jane believes that women should wear what they like to wear and that each person has her own style. Wearing the Muslim veil in America can be seen as a woman’s own style as it is something that is not “socially acceptable” (according to Jane). If the hijab were even to be considered fashionable by American standards then she believes that we will see more people who wear the veil. She believes that clothes represent a person’s individuality and it should be what a person feels beautiful and

confident in. Wearing the veil is a bold statement as it represents a woman's confidence in not conforming to the fashion standards of America.

### *Beauty in America*

In order to understand why Americans may view veiled women as oppressed or discriminate against them, it is important to understand where their concepts come from and what Americans think about beauty. By understanding what they believe to be beautiful, it will then be easier to understand why they react to the veiling of Muslim women.

The prevalent notion in America is that beauty is, among other factors, based on how thin you are. This attention toward thinness is generated, in part, by a woman's social group as well as the media (Mussap 2009:121). Only the beautiful and thin are valued and loved, thus "thinness is seen as a sign of success, health, and being in charge of your life" (Hesse-Biber et al. 2006:208). This thin-ideal standard is found in women of all ages, not just the youth (Dunkel et al 2010:58). When representing a positive appearance to someone, weight seems to play a key factor (Hesse-Biber et al. 2006:210). Body weight is important in determining whether someone is attractive or not (Hesse-Biber et al. 2006:210).

The more prominent aspect of a woman's beauty is how comfortable she feels nude. In Western society, "women are associated with the body and the men with the mind" (Hesse-Biber et al. 2006:210). This relates to the thinness ideal because many women do not feel good nude unless they are thin. A woman's beauty (physical attractiveness) is in part judged by nudity. For example, beauty pageants (e.g. Miss USA) have a swimsuit component where the contestants are judged, and compared,

partially unclothed (Weinberg and Williams 2010:49). The sexual gaze that Muslim women want to avoid is flaunted by American women. It is perceived in Western culture that men put greater value on physically attractive partners than do women (Weinberg and Williams 2010:50). Women feel that male gaze and may see themselves as “objects to be viewed and evaluated solely on the appearance of their body” (Weinberg and Williams 2010:48). Female nudity is produced and consumed more than male nudity, and women are believed to embody sex itself, “the bare body is a unique social mirror, stripped of the protective shroud of clothing, exposed and vulnerable” (Weinberg and Williams 2010:48). Being unclothed can lead to a woman feeling vulnerable to judgments of her body (Weinberg and Williams 2010:49). Women strive to feel good naked because that is where their beauty is recognized. If someone is uncomfortable being nude, it becomes important for them to hide their body in some way (Weinberg and Williams 2010:55).

There is a saying in America that “sex sells.” There are magazines and books sold that cater to this very notion. Sexuality in America is exploited through women, “a woman’s sexuality is used to sell things, or a woman is objectified...if a man doesn’t know her at all, all he sees is her physical appearance” (Droogsma 2007:305).

Muslim women argue that the scantily clad American way of dressing is oppressive because it is forcing women to maintain this ideal body (Ruby 2006:64). American women have pressure to dress provocatively, and Muslim women view that as oppressive (Droogsma 2007:306). However, some American women believe that liberating the body from clothes can lead to a greater sense of sexual adventure (Weinberg and Williams 2010:56). Clothing may be seen as protection, but nudity can be

portrayed as freeing (Weinberg and Williams 2010:48). In American society, for some women, reclaiming their bodies means public expression of their sexuality (Bunting 2001). Nudity is used as a way to expand one's sexual horizons, loosened from convention (Weinberg and Williams 2010:49).

Part of my interview with Jane involved a discussion about what beauty means to her as an American woman. Contrary to what my preliminary research shows, Jane did not feel that weight was a factor when looking at a beautiful woman. She believed that it had to do with facial symmetry, eyes, and "inner beauty". She also mentioned that beauty is also seen by how a woman's hair fits her face. Most of my secondary research focused on how Americans believe weight is a key factor in perceiving beauty. Jane expressed that same thought, but she believes that men look at a woman's weight to procreate. She meant that a woman with wider hips would be considered more beautiful because she would have the ability to easily bear children. While my research found that being thin led to the ideal beauty, what Jane mentions is a trend that we are seeing increasing in America: that curves are beautiful.

#### *Beauty and the hijab in Islam*

It can be said that sexual desires and symbols are in the form of hair and that is why some women believe it is required to cover their hair (Ruby 2006:59). Some theologians (of Islam) believe that women should dress in a way that conceals their beauty when outside the home (Dunkel et al 2010:57). However, the hijab can be a fashion statement in itself. This fashion dynamic cannot really be explained by cultural or religious motivations, as the different ways a woman wears the headscarf around her head and draped over the shoulders are subject to fashion and trends (Williams and Vashi

2007:285). Companies who make headscarves to be worn by Muslim women are aware of the latest fashion trends (Solomon 2007:157). People who wear the Muslim veil communicate their fashion sense by the fabric that they select and the way they drape and wear the scarf/veil (Solomon 2007:175). However, some people believe that the hijab cannot be used as a fashion statement because it conflicts with the reasons why a person would wear it, which is for modest behavior and dress (Dudar 2014). Some Muslim women may wear the veil with American clothing, but they become subject to the same insecurities as non-Muslim American women because of the Americanized clothing that they wear. Women who wear traditional clothing (including Muslim women who wear their traditional dress along with the hijab) have lower body image problems than women who wear Western style clothing (Tolaymat 2011).

The hijab plays a very important role in how a Muslim woman identifies herself. It may act as a barrier against Western culture so women are not tempted to forget about their Islamic morals. The veil may provide protection against the strong drive for thinness in Western standards of beauty (Dunkel et al 2010:63). By being able to create their identity through their religion and not identify with American ideals and morals, the hijab allows women to take control over their bodies (Ruby 2006:61). Their identity is secured when they are able to refrain from public scrutiny over how they are dressed. The hijab is often associated with loose fitting clothes that cover the whole body as well so as not to show off the womanly shape. By wearing these things, a woman can create her own identity and take charge of her own body. Wearing the veil is not about shame of the female body but rather a form of privacy over the body (Bunting 2001.)

The hijab is associated with modest behavior, as it dictates a woman's modest dress and moral behavior (Ruby 2006:58). In traditional Islamic countries, the status of a woman's body is a sign of the moral status of the nation, "women are perceived to be the cultural carriers of their society" (Ruby 2006:58). Women needed to maintain a certain presence in public due to this concept, "veiling assumes cultural status connected to a woman's, and thus her family's, honor and respect for social order" (Zeiger 2008:273). The hijab diminishes the sex appeal of women and thus creates a virtuous public domain (Ruby 2006:58). By wearing the scarf they are showing that they do not conform to what they believe to be immoral attitudes (Ruby 2006:59).

While Islam is a religion, it also has a strong cultural influence and women believe they have to secure the Muslim identity in order to protect their overall cultural identity. While some women may feel that they can participate in both worlds (Muslim and American), other women believe that wearing the veil is a way to demonstrate the differences between the values of each place (Ruby 2006:59). By wearing the hijab, women can be part of both the Muslim world and the American world (Williams and Vashi 2007:272). In a sense, it allows them to create a cultural space for themselves (Williams and Vashi 2007:272).

#### *Reasons Women Veil*

It is important to know the reasons why a Muslim woman decides to wear the veil as each person has a different story (religion, culture, empowerment, etc.). However, in doing research a few common reasons popped up. In Islamic countries, women start wearing the veil as they hit puberty. In America it is the second generation that is more likely to wear the veil than their immigrant parents (Ali 2005:515). Some girls started

wearing the veil to be rebellious against their parents and relatives and some older Muslim women even think that the hijab is just as fashion trend that the young girls adopt so that they can be like their friends (Ali 2005:521).

Being a good Muslim is an important part as to why a woman wears the hijab. Some women believe that not veiling seems to indicate a bad Muslim and they wear the veil out of obligation (Cole and Ahmadi 2003:54-55). This seems to be more prevalent with immigrants who only have their religion when they arrive at America and find it as a way to join a community. In an ethnically diverse community, wearing the hijab is a way to identify with a certain community visibly and a reminder to stay within Islam in a country where Islam is not prevalent (Ruby 2006:60). Some women even feel a social pressure to conform to wearing the veil in order to maintain their public reputation (Williams and Vashi 2007:281).

The veil forms a Muslim identity for a woman. Wearing the traditional Islamic dress allows a woman to reflect her commitment to Islam and connect her to the Muslim community (Dunkel et al 2010:57). These women are not forced to wear the veil by their “male superiors;” rather, they believe their religion requires it, as it helps them maintain identity and respect as Muslim women (Dunkel et al. 2010:57). Some women feel that veiling is used to strengthen their relationship with God; recent converts want people to recognize them as Muslim and the hijab is a visible way to show that (Cole and Ahmadi 2003:56). The hijab can connect these new converts to other Muslim women (Droogsma 2007:301). By wearing the hijab, a woman can deemphasize her membership with another group (for example, African Americans) and become noticed more for being Muslim (Droogsma 2007:302). Because the hijab is the only visible marker that a



Muslim woman has, it is what sets her apart from the non-Muslim women in America (Ruby 2006:60). There is this growing feeling among Muslim women that they no longer want to associate with the West and their style of clothing, and the veil is what sets them apart and confirms their Muslim identity (Ruby 2006:60). While Americans may see the hijab as a symbol of oppression and patriarchal rule, Muslim women see the hijab as a symbol of pride and unique culture (Droogsma 2007:296). This clearly defines their identity and allows them to wear their veil with pride.

Another reason why a Muslim woman may wear the veil is because it acts as a sort of behavior check for her (Droogsma 2007:304). By wearing the veil she is not tempted to do things that would be outside the moral standard of the Islamic faith. The hijab functions as a reminder that women need to guard their behavior so that they please God (Droogsma 2007:304). It also prevents bad behavior like trying drugs or drinking (Droogsma 2007:304). It is also a reminder for a woman to not go to places where sexuality is on display, for example, bars and strip clubs (Ruby 2006:61). Women monitor their behavior when they wear the hijab because they are representing Islam to everyone else (in America) (Williams and Vashi 2007:282). It can also act as a behavior check for women as it sets boundaries between men and women and allows that chaste society that is dependent on women's modesty (Ruby 2006:58). Muslim women believe that sexuality should be saved for an intimate relationship (Bunting 2001). Intimate relationships are preserved when women wear the hijab in public. A woman's beauty is saved for her husband, not flaunted for everyone to see (Droogsma 2007:309). Only close family members can view a woman without the hijab, and therefore, it keeps their familial relationships more important (Droogsma 2007:309).

The hijab can even be worn as a source of freedom. In some countries the veil is used to protect a woman's modesty in front of men. That way of thinking can transfer over to America where women wear it to maintain their Islamic beliefs while being surrounded by people who believe in other things. These women do not have to conform to the fashion standards set by Americans (Droogsma 2007:310). Muslim women do not conform to the ideals set by the American culture that a person needs to look good and wear the nicest clothes in order to get noticed. These women may see Americans as being oppressed by the ways they dress (Droogsma 2007:310). By not conforming to the scantily-clad image of the American woman, Muslim women who wear the hijab promote respect and dignity from their peers as well as protection (Ruby 2006:59). The male gaze can be seen as oppressive, and by wearing the veil the women are taking control over their bodies (Droogsma 2007:305). Wearing the hijab allows a woman to have more freedom from gender bias, as it is a symbol of religious piety and is respected within the Muslim community (Williams and Vashi 2007:282).

As Americans exploit their sexuality through their clothing, Muslim women use their clothing to prevent sexual exploitation. However, the hijab also can be interpreted as a form of sexual objectification, as a mechanism to control women's sexuality and exclude her from the public sphere (Tolaymat 2011). In other words, women are interpreted as sexual objects that need to be desexualized (Tolaymat 2011). Wearing the hijab reminds women not to become sexually involved too early. They hide their beauty so that men will not look at them in a sexual way.

The hyper sexuality of men seems to be a key component when women decide to veil. It is believed that there is a threat to women because it is thought that men cannot

control their sexual urges (Williams and Vashi 2007:276). Men stop looking in a sexual way at a woman who puts on the hijab and take more interest in her personality (Bunting 2001). Men are forced to look beyond a woman's physical appearance, and the hijab lets them know they do not have the right to look at a woman's body and judge her beauty (Droogsma 2007:305).

Expressing sexuality in public is something that Muslim women and non-Muslim American women disagree on. There is this notion in Muslim culture that Americans sexualized culture is a significant problem for Muslims and a threat to society's well-being (Williams and Vashi 2007:277). Muslim women can be torn between conforming to the fashion practices and beauty standards popularized by the American public or pressure to wear conservative clothing and/or the hijab synonymous with their religion (Droogsma 2007:297).

*Muslim Women who do not veil in America*

There are Muslim women who do not veil. This is mostly a personal choice by the woman, just like the decision to wear the veil in America. Sometimes, women find barriers to economic growth if they do not act or dress a certain way. One woman in the U.S. commented that she removed the veil because she felt it was hindering her ability to get a job (Cole and Ahmadi 2003:61). After 9/11, some Muslim women removed their veil as a precaution in order to avoid harassment, or worse (Haddad 2007:262). This is a personal choice that is allowed by the Qur'an; women can remove the veil if it becomes dangerous for them. Women who choose to wear the veil and those who do not differ in what they believe the veil is required for. Women who choose to not wear the veil believe it is part of a cultural dress code rather than a religious one (Ruby 2006:59).

These women believe that veiling does not have a religious connotation to it and it is worn due to local and global cultural positions (Ruby 2006:59). Women are taught this dress by tradition and not part of religious requirement (Ruby 2006:59). However, in some cases, there is pressure in the community to conform to wearing the veil (Ruby 2006:59).

There is the general belief that the veiling required by the Qur'an is actually a way of dressing. Some women do not veil because they believe that dressing modestly is enough to satisfy that commitment (Dudar 2014). It is a way of life that involves conservative clothing for modesty (Dudar 2014). It is a hard decision to remove the veil. In one case, a girl wore the hijab to kindergarten but her teacher would remove it every day, saying it was unnecessary (Zakiyyah 2014). People who do not wear the veil can get ridicule from their Muslim community and people who do wear the veil can get ridicule from the larger American society (Zakiyyah 2014). Some women believe that by removing the veil they feel closer to God and they do not need to deal with either group of people (Zakiyyah 2014).

My research thus far has focused on the Muslim women who wear the veil in America and how it should really be a symbol of empowerment. However, my interview with Laiba opened up some discussion of why women would choose not to veil, even though they are Muslim. Laiba is a woman from a Middle Eastern country who used to wear the veil. In her home country, it was required. She decided years before coming to America that she did not like hiding herself and once she arrived on American she took off the veil and has not worn it since. She was highly influenced by the Western media shown in her country because she wanted to live up to that standard; she wanted to be just

like the women she saw on TV. Wearing the veil, in her mind, covers up a person's beauty and it makes her situation worse as men are more curious as to what lies under that veil. She equates that with the religion saying what is beautiful and what is not—the people do not have a choice in the matter. However, Laiba does have friends who veil who say they do it for themselves. As mentioned earlier, women in America are more likely to veil than the women in their home country. Laiba mentioned that in her home country the women are showing more of their faces and the hijab is pulled back so more of the hair is showing. To her, veiling is a cultural thing and not part of her religion—in America, she has the choice of whether or not she should veil, which is a liberty she did not get in her home country.

### **Conclusion**

Women in America tend to view beauty as a part of their sexuality; as “sex sells” is a prevalent notion. They also tend to believe that the fewer clothes that a woman wears, the better she is at conveying beauty. It is the women who are thin that are comfortable wearing less clothing and those are the women who are considered the most beautiful in American society. In order to look beautiful a woman must be thin and be able to look good while she is naked. The Islamic faith does not have this same view. It has a high regard for modesty and the belief in female modesty is what keeps their societies pure and holds honor. In order to be modest, a woman must wear clothing that is synonymous with that attitude. This means wearing loose clothing and (in some cases) veiling to conceal any womanly shapes. Anything that might be considered sexual by a woman is concealed so as not to portray that kind of demeanor. In contrast, women in America believe that by covering yourself you are hiding something shameful: a fat body,

perhaps, or an ugly one. There is this notion that in order to be free you need to be confident with yourself, and that is something you cannot do if you have to cover yourself in public and resort to staying in the private sphere.

Muslims have been under a lot of scrutiny by the American public as a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Women in Muslim countries are considered to be oppressed and under the control of their male superiors. When women in America practice Islam, they run the risk of being associated with the Islamic behavior that degrades women (as shown by the media.) The men are thought to oppress the women through concealing their beauty, something that Americans believe to be essential to individualism. By wearing the hijab and dressing modestly, the women are a visible indicator of what Americans believe to be wrong with the Islamic faith.

Identity is extremely important in American society. Consider that women who wear the Muslim veil in America could be doing so because they want to show off their identity. In Islamic countries, wearing the veil does not make a woman stand out in a crowd. Her identity is assumed. However, in America if a woman veils, she stands out. This can be deciphered as empowerment for her—she willingly portrays her Islamic identity even though it could have negative consequences. She is doing this because it is part of her identity and that is what America is all about.

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Interviews

Interview with non-Muslim American Woman (Jane)

March 2014

Interview with Muslim woman who used to veil (Laiba)

March 2014

## APPENDIX A: METHODS

When starting this thesis I had originally planned on conducting focus groups in order to supplement my secondary research. These focus groups would have consisted of a group of Muslim women who wear the veil, a group of Muslim women who do not wear the veil, and a group of non-Muslim American women. However, due to the lack of confidentiality, the IRB did not accept my original proposal. Due to time constraints, I opted to do interviews instead of the focus groups so that I would be able to get approved and start the interviews in a quicker amount of time.

To find people to interview I used a snowball technique and I had many initial responses. However, after trying to set up dates to meet I was only able to interview two people. One woman was a Muslim woman who used to veil and the other was a non-Muslim American woman. They were each given consent forms which they did not have to sign. Both the interviews lasted around thirty minutes.

During the interviews, the questions I asked were:

- 1) Why do you, or do not, veil?
- 2) What do you think veiling means to your peers on campus or in your community? (Taken from Cole and Ahmadi 2003)
- 3) In your own words, what are the characteristics of a beautiful woman?
- 4) How do clothes represent beauty? Are they a representation of yourself?

A couple questions were formulated from information that was brought up in my secondary research (Questions 2 and 4). The other questions were specific to the material that I wanted to know about (Questions 1 and 3). I asked questions that were centered around beauty because I thought that was a good way to get a discussion going about the topic surrounding the veil.

## APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL

Office of the Vice President for  
Research  
*Protection of Human Subjects Review  
Board*



5703 Alumni Hall, Room 114  
Orono, Maine 04469-5703  
Tel: 207-581-1498  
Fax: 207-581-1300  
www.umaine.edu

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Hannah Blakeman  
96 Bosworth Street, Unit #i  
Old Town, ME 04468

FROM: Gayle Jones  
Assistant to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
(IRB)

SUBJECT: "Is the Veil Worn by Muslim Women a Symbol of an Oppressed Lifestyle?"  
#2014-01-01

DATE: March 17, 2014

The above referenced project was approved by the University of Maine's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) in an expedited review. The approval period is 3/12/2014 through 3/11/2015. A continuing review of this project must be conducted by the IRB before the end of the approval period. Although you will receive a request for this information approximately 6-8 weeks before that date, it is your responsibility to submit the information in sufficient time to allow for review before the approval period expires.

Enclosed is an approved, stamped copy of the consent document for this project. The approval for this consent expires on 3/11/2015. **This approved, stamped copy must be duplicated and used when enrolling subjects during the approval period.** The Board waived the requirement for signed consent under Section I.L.3.b. of the Policy.

Please remember that each subject must be given a copy of the consent document. Any unanticipated problems or harm to the subject must be reported to the IRB immediately. Any proposed changes to the research must be approved by the IRB **prior** to implementation.

If you have questions, please contact me at 1-1498. Thank you.

pc: Lisa Neuman

UMaine Institutional Review Board  
Approved for Use Through:

MAR 11 2015

### **Consent Form**

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Hannah Blakeman, an undergraduate student in the department of Anthropology at the University of Maine. The faculty sponsor is Dr. Lisa Neuman of the Anthropology and Native American Studies Departments at the University of Maine. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding how Muslim and non-Muslim women at the University of Maine view the practice of wearing the veil. You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

#### **What will You Be Asked to Do?**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to answer a series of questions during an interview. Sample questions are: "In your own words, what are the characteristics that make a woman beautiful?" and "What do you think veiling means to your peers on campus?" It may take approximately a half-hour to participate.

#### **Risks**

You may become uncomfortable answering questions. You may skip questions or stop at any time

#### **Benefits**

While this study will have no direct benefit to you, the overall potential benefit of this research is greater understanding of the different perceptions of the meanings of veiling among Muslim women as well as non-Muslim women.

#### **Confidentiality**

Your name will not be on any of the documents. Data will be kept in a locked briefcase. This information may be accessed by the faculty advisor, Dr. Lisa Neuman for the purpose of supervising Hannah Blakeman's honors thesis. Your name or other identifying information will not be reported in the honors thesis or in any future publications that may result from it. All data will be destroyed after one year.

#### **Voluntary**

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

#### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Hannah Blakeman, at (603) 748-1941, or by email, hannah.blakeman@umit.maine.edu. You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study, Dr. Lisa Neuman, at (207) 581-4489, or by email, lisa.neuman@umit.maine.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Jones,

Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at (207) 581-1498 (or email gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu).

Your participation in the interview implies consent.

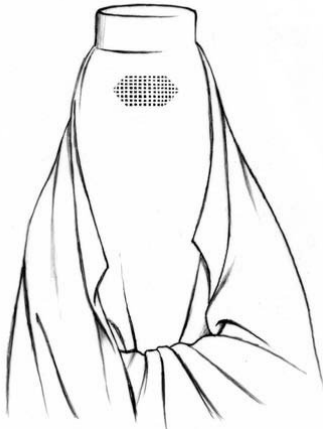
## APPENDIX C: FIGURES

Figure 1: Hijab



<http://www.oocities.org/puteriumnomy/hijab.html>

Figure 2: Burqa



<https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/Burqa.jpg>

Figure 3: Niqab



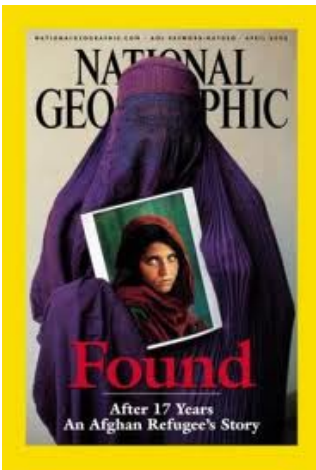
<http://islamicartdb.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/niqab-line-drawing.jpg>

Figure 4: Afghan Girl from 1985 National Geographic Story



<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2002/04/afghan-girl/original-story-text>

Figure 5: Afghan Girl Revealed, 2002 National Geographic Story



[http://www.suprmchaos.com/nat-geo\\_apr2002.jpg](http://www.suprmchaos.com/nat-geo_apr2002.jpg)

Figure 6: Afghan Girl Revealed, 2002



[http://www.jmu.edu/lexia/images/afghan\\_girl2.jpg](http://www.jmu.edu/lexia/images/afghan_girl2.jpg)

## AUTHOR BIO

Hannah Blakeman grew up in the small town of Sutton, New Hampshire. She graduated from Kearsarge Regional High School in 2010. She went on to pursue a degree in Anthropology at the University of Maine and over the years she added minors in French and Business. Her passion is playing lacrosse, and she got the chance to play all four years of college. She became treasurer and captain of the team her junior year. Hannah loves the outdoors and hopes that she can use her anthropology degree to travel the world.